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## A Russian Painter Of The Nineteenth Century, Elyas Repin

by LOUIS E. LORD

In selecting Elyas Repin as a representative Russian painter of the nineteenth century I am not so much interested in the biography nor even the artistic career of the man as I am in showing how he epitomizes the Russian painting of that period. This important school of painting has been little studied by western critics; there are few copies of the paintings outside Russia and few names that have commanded an international reputation. Veretchagin is perhaps the one conspicuous exception, but in Russia the fame of Repin overtops that of this great war painter.

I have often thought that the history of a country could be more intimately written from a careful survey of the contents of its art galleries than from the dispatches in the war office. In France it would be easy to trace the development of the people's soul and even to infer the political development from the frozen classicism of David, through the grace and freshness of the Barbizon school and the prurient prettiness of the later art to the clear flame that burns alike in the genius of Rodin and the artificers of the commemorative medallions. So in the Russian painting of the nineteenth century the historian may read all the details of an oppressed people's struggles to be free.

The significant work of the century began in 1834 with the exhibition of Bryloff's *Last Days of Pompeii* (Pl. XXV, fig. 1). Perhaps no painting has ever been received with more enthusiasm. While it was being painted in Rome, the most exaggerated reports were spread as to its excellence. It is said that Sir Walter Scott sat speechless before it for an hour and then said that the artist had created not a picture but an epic. Its fame preceded its arrival at St. Petersburg and



*Fig. 1*—PETROGRAD, MUSEUM OF ALEXANDER III: LAST DAYS OF POMPEII.  
BY BRYLOFF.



*Fig. 2*—TOLEDO, MUSEUM OF ART: THE PLOWERS, BY SEIDENBERG.

from the time of its exhibition there in 1834 till the death of the artist in 1852, Bryloff was a dictator in Russian art. It is difficult for us to see in the painting anything to justify such enthusiasm. A contemporary says that the painter has "stolen the fires of Vesuvius and lightnings of heaven." The colors may have faded somewhat. At any rate they are now cold and hard; the figures are confused and the interest dissipated. The painting gives the unfortunate impression of being a sort of unhappy and unwilling combination of the congealed classicism of David and the boisterous turmoil of Tintoretto. The best portion of the picture is not the central group—the open-mouthed woman whose flight is assisted by her husband and hindered by her clinging child—but the group of male figures at the left, struggling with the falling door. Here the painter may be said to have fairly solved the problem of intricate and united action. In the left foreground the painter has represented himself—a bearded man in middle life. Stilted and grandiose as this painting is, it forms the basis on which modern Russian painting is developed. From 1834 till 1863 the prevailing type is the large canvas, the semi-historical subject.

Two tendencies were, however, at work which resulted in the secession of 1870, the founding of the Artel, and the overthrow of this stilted pseudo-classicism. These were, realism as represented by Venetziannoff, Fedetoff, Peroff, (and in religious painting, Ivanoff), and purpose painting. The latter is the most characteristic feature of Russian nineteenth century painting. We should now call it propaganda and be charmed with our penetration as we always are when we delude ourselves with the belief that we have solved a problem by renaming it. It was part of the liberal movement begun with the accession of that kindly tyrant Alexander Second in 1855. The Nihilists began their campaign of "going in among the people." In literature the works of Gogol and Tolstoi began to arraign the governmental abuses. Purpose painting—

such painting as *The Apotheosis of War* by Veretshagin, "dedicated to all conquerors, past, present, and to come," with its bitter satire on the glories of war and the fruits thereof, or *The Plowers of Seidenberg* (Pl. XXV, fig. 2), with its scathing indictment of conditions on the Russian estates, began to be in vogue. The mediaeval artist wrought for the glory of God, the Russian artist for the destruction of autocracy. The paintings of this school reveal the pathos and despair of Russian life—the deadly apathy that has ceased to feel pain, that has never known delight, the greed and injustice of oppression, the endless waiting for deliverance, the absence of desire. These men are in a sense realists, but the world that they depict is that old Russian world where the *lacrimae rerum* never cease—that world whose divinities are not the merciful twin gods Hypnos and Thanatos, but the Erenys of desolation and despair.

From this purpose painting historical painting was an easy development. Figure and landscape painting—painting for its own sake and not for moral purposes—came later when the earlier impulse had exhausted itself and the artists perceived that the beauty of the painting might in itself be an aim. In the most general terms, then, it may be said that Russian painting developed from a formal classicism through realism and purpose painting to a free and independent art.

Elyas Repin has passed through all these stages, save the first, and seems equally at home in them all. He was born, of Cossack ancestry, in 1844. He was educated in the Royal Academy and studied in France and Italy. He has, however, taken nothing from his residence abroad except an unusually careful technique and a thorough grounding in the elements of his art—a background of exact knowledge which many of his countrymen lack. Practically all his life has been lived in Russia. In thought and feeling he is thoroughly Russian. In versatility he is nearly the rival of Menzel. He has painted with distinction in almost every field except that of religious art. Here his attempts

have been conspicuous failures. He seems, like Rembrandt, unable to paint forms which he has never seen. Manoah's Opfer in the Dresden gallery, with the curiously unhappy angel which mars that picture illustrates my meaning. Something of this inability to visualize satisfactorily unreal figures seems Repin's only limitation.

The Arrest in a Village is one of his purpose paintings. It is an early work. In a barren room lighted by a narrow window and a half-open door, stands a young man who has just been seized by the agents of the secret police. The officer in charge is examining some of the documents which have been found and from the room half disclosed at the right, another spy is eagerly bringing fresh evidence. Through the door is also to be seen the face of the terrified young wife. The contrast between the open scornful face of the prisoner and the fiendish anxiety of the spy who is bending over the officer in charge is masterly.

The Reply of the Cossacks to Sultan Mohammed IV (Pl. XXVI, fig. 2) was one of Repin's favorite historical themes. Himself descended from the Cossacks, he seems to become by his own right an interpreter of their boisterous glee. A letter is to be written in answer to the Sultan's demands. The scribe sits at the table and about him are gathered the general, his staff, and many privates. They are vieing with each other in suggesting insults and gibes which the scribe is writing with the keenest of appreciation. There are many variants of this picture. One is reminded of the many versions of Boecklin's Island of the Dead. These pictures are a veritable riot of color. The number of facial types is also remarkable. Every shade of mirth from sneers to shouts of laughter is there. The brush strokes are bold, the effects broad and sure. The paint is laid on in great masses, reminding one of Rembrandt's later style. The faces are carefully modeled and the clothing and ornaments only broadly sketched in. They are masterpieces of composition and justly among the most esteemed works of this artist.



*Fig. 1*—MOSCOW, TRETIAKOFF GALLERY: IVAN THE TERRIBLE AND HIS SON, BY REPIN.



*Fig. 2*—PETROGRAD, MUSEUM OF ALEXANDER III: REPLY OF THE COSSACKS TO SULTAN MOHAMMED IV, BY REPIN.

In the Tretiakoff Gallery in Moscow a crowd can always be found before the awful painting of Ivan the Terrible and his Son (Pl. XXVI, fig. 1). Women sometimes faint here and an attendant is always in the neighborhood in case of eventualities. Some years ago a man became temporarily deranged while looking at the picture, and slashed it across with his knife. Ivan in a fit of anger has struck his son with his iron pointed staff and realized too late that his blow has been fatal. The realism of this painting is almost overpowering. The ghastly details are revolting. The blood streaming from the head and nose of the dying prince, his vacant eye, and the insane ecstasy of fear in the assassin's eyes are things that haunt the imagination.

Repin is equally at home in painting Russian peasant scenes. In a department of art which C. E. Makovsky and Vasnetzoff have made particularly their own, he is able to surpass either as it were almost casually. Russian peasants have few festivities, but they know how to enjoy those few with the utter abandon of children. "The care that rides behind the horseman" is not theirs. The spirit of the village dance, the spirit of the imperial ballet without a trace of its grace and lightness, lives in Repin's picture of The Village Dance with its ring of eager observers, the fond couple at the right, the village critic on the left, and the musicians in the left foreground. What a contrast the latter are, the violinist with her light touch and rapt expression and the blacksmith who presides over the pipes—a typical Marsyas!

Neither Veretchagin nor Repin are portrait artists, yet each could turn his hand to this if necessary—witness the portrait of an old steward in the Alexander Third gallery at Petrograd and Repin's painting of Leo Tolstoi. Repin has painted the great writer many times but Tolstoi at the Plow (Pl. XXVII, fig. 1), is the Russian critics' favorite. It is Tolstoi in his own chosen occupation. In the study of the face one forgets almost how carefully the artist has managed the elements of his picture. The very idiosyncracies of Russian agricultural implements are made to screen and



reveal the central figure. There is a suggestion of the novelist's own great nature in the sweep of the hills and the cleansing breath of the breeze. It seems almost impossible that the same man who drew the careless children of *The Village Dance* should have also given us the monumental resolution and the brooding pity of this stern face. It is the face of a nation's hero who like *Regulus of Rome* has put from him the clients who crowd about him and the relatives who would stay his course and treads alone the path of his own soul's salvation.

The *Burlaki* (Pl. XXVII, fig. 2)—the haulers of the Volga—is, perhaps, Repin's masterpiece. Along a strip of barren sand, under a pitiless sun, a group of peasants are slowly advancing laboriously towing a heavy vessel. The first impression the painting conveys is one of sheer weariness. It is the impossible physical strain that breaks the heart. They are of many types and all ages—these haulers—one is a man bowed with years, another just a lad who is not yet broken to the work, and he lifts his shoulderstrap to readjust the strain; he is wistful, questioning vaguely, almost rebellious; another is almost overcome with the heat and shades his head with his hand and arm, one is a loafer, but he is the only one. The rest all step in time. If the strains of the pathetic "*Song of the Volga Boatman*" could only be heard the picture would be complete. It is just such a sight as I once saw looking down on the Volga from the Kremlin at Nijni Novgorod: the broad, peaceful plain before me, the sun setting beyond the far hills, the noble river, a broad silver band, drawn to a thread on either horizon, and from its bank far below the weary strains of the haulers' song floated up like the wail of a people forgotten of God, like the refrain of the Russian national hymn, "Grant to us peace in our time, O Lord."



*Fig. 1*—MOSCOW, TRETIAKOFF GALLERY: TOLSTOI AT THE PLOW BY REPIN.



*Fig. 2*—THE BURLAKI, BY REPIN.